

# Gazette Opinion: Kids' health isn't a bargaining chip

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It's not often that state and federal changes align for the immediate benefit of Montana children as they did in the Nov. 4 elections. Seventy percent of Montana voters supported the Healthy Montana Kids initiative. On the national level, a strong supporter of the States Children's Health Insurance Program was elected president. The reauthorization of SCHIP, which provides health coverage to about 6 million American children through state-federal partnerships, was one of the first accomplishments of President Barack Obama's administration. Montana Sen. Max Baucus was a chief author of the children's legislation, which was supported by Sen. Jon Tester and Rep. Denny Rehberg.

## A matter of fairness

By the time Baucus arrived in Billings last week to celebrate with other SCHIP champions, the extension of health coverage to more Montana children had hit an unexpected obstacle. The four Republican state legislators on the health and human services appropriations subcommittee voted against funding the program voters established. The four Democrats on the committee favored funding, so the measure failed on a tie vote. Surrounded by Billings health care professionals, children's advocates and a toddler whose cancer care is being covered by Montana CHIP, Baucus said he hopes state lawmakers will carry out the program approved by Montana voters.

Ninety-three percent of the 17,000 children now covered by Montana CHIP have at least one working parent. Providing these families opportunity to insure their children is a matter of fairness. These working parents pay a tax on every dollar they earn to help fund Medicare hospital insurance for elderly and disabled adults. Shouldn't workers' children have access to health coverage, too?

Without CHIP or Medicaid coverage, families often delay or forego care for their children. When families seek care and can't pay, costs are shifted to Montanans who do pay for insurance and care. An analysis last year by University of Montana economist Steve Seninger determined that covering children with CHIP would result in a net gain for Montana of \$1,156 per child per year. Simply covering children's care upfront would reduce the cost shift to other Montanans at an amount nearly triple what it would cost state government to cover a child.

The Legislature has authority to appropriate money, and a majority of lawmakers could refuse to fund Healthy Montana Kids. However, the Legislature couldn't spend Healthy Montana Kids money on anything else unless it first repealed the law the people enacted on Nov. 4, according to Greg Petesch, the Legislature's chief attorney.

Such a repeal would be an affront to Montana voters. Sure, things have changed since November. That's when Montanans elected 125 of our 150 lawmakers. Should we immediately reconsider all those choices too? That would be as ridiculous as saying that the voters' Healthy Montana Kids decision should be blocked, delayed or rescinded.

## Minimum eligibility

Without Healthy Montana Kids, Montana would continue to have the lowest CHIP income eligibility limit of any state but North Dakota and only the minimum children's Medicaid eligibility. Healthy Montana Kids would raise those thresholds to be more in line with what other states are doing for their children. Healthy Montana Kids recognizes that even middle-income families - especially those who are self-employed or working for small businesses - may not have means to pay the full cost of health insurance for their children.

We call on all Montana lawmakers to be CHIP champions. Support the Healthy Montana Kids funding as proposed by Gov. Brian Schweitzer's executive budget. Don't balance the state's finances by leaving 30,000 Montana children without health coverage.